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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000079

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: THAILAND'S POLITICAL TURBULENCE PUSHES
SOUTH TO BACK BURNER

REF: A. BANGKOK 1612 (HOW HOT IS IT?)

- [1](#)B. CHIANG MAI 60 (NEW NSC CHIEF SEEN AS THREAT) AND PREVIOUS
- [1](#)C. BANGKOK 1210 (RTG TALKS WITH INSURGENTS STALLED) AND PREVIOUS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, CG, ConGen, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (S/NF) A late-May round of secret talks between the Thai Government and southern insurgents yielded good progress on a proposal to create pilot "peace zones" in specific conflict areas, according to Mark Tamthai, RTG point-man for the talks. However, making the proposal operational anytime soon is highly unlikely since the RTG's preoccupation with ongoing national political deadlock has pushed decisions on the south to the back burner, he said. Nonetheless, Tamthai is encouraged that RTG officials administering the southern border provinces are, in his view, finally beginning to embrace a non-military solution (in part because of recent setbacks there). He also believes the RTG is nearly ready to take the next step - difficult but needed - of making the secret talks public. The next round of talks is tentatively scheduled for late June or early July, though Tamthai cautions that real progress will hinge on domestic political dynamics and a coming re-structuring of the RTG's peace process team. End Summary.

Progress Toward Pilot "Peace Zone" Proposal

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Consul General met May 29 in Chiang Mai with Dr. Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace and point-man for the RTG's secret dialogue with southern insurgents. Tamthai had recently returned from a meeting with the insurgents in Bali the previous week. He described the Bali round as a stripped-down working meeting (he was the only RTG official present) that made "good progress" on the two sides' shared goal of advancing beyond confidence-building measures toward recommendations for meaningful operational changes on the ground in southern Thailand. Specifically, the sides are hammering out a proposal to create pilot "peace zones" in specific conflict areas.

National Political Deadlock Pushes South to Back Burner

13. (S/NF) The next step is to get the RTG and the insurgent commanders to agree to implement this pilot project. Tamthai was not optimistic this would happen anytime soon. He cited Bangkok's intense preoccupation with the ongoing domestic political deadlock (Ref A) as something that has "pushed decisions regarding the south to the back burner." Moreover, the RTG's structural line-up for handling the peace process is again in flux.

RTG Re-adjusting Its Peace Process Team

14. (S/NF) To illustrate, Tamthai provide a quick history lesson of the RTG's structural approach to the peace process:

-- Initially, a cabinet-level steering committee (chaired by the Prime Minister and including the Royal Thai Army Commander-in-Chief) oversaw the process, with the actual work being handled by a working group whose main participants were the National Security Council (NSC) Secretary General, Tamthai, and an NSC senior staffer.

-- About a year after Surayud Chulanont became interim Prime Minister following the September 2006 military coup, he streamlined the structure by choosing to never convene the steering committee. As a result, Tamthai and the working group reported directly to PM Surayud. Tamthai said this simplified structure empowered his working group and increased its effectiveness, and was in place for about the last four months of the interim government's existence.

-- When the new, elected government headed by PM Samak

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Sundaravej took office in early 2008, Samak delegated leadership of the peace process to RTA Commander-in-Chief Anupong Paochinda. According to Tamthai, Anupong recently decided to revert to the original structure: a cabinet-level steering committee overseeing a working group. But this decision has yet to be implemented, and the new players yet to be identified.

15. (S/NF) As a result, Tamthai currently has no senior body to report to regarding the outcome of the Bali talks. This leaves no near-term possibility of moving forward on the recommendation for pilot peace zones - implementation of which would require RTG decisions on issues such as troop deployments and funding commitments. Other delaying factors include the aforementioned focus on national domestic politics, and the fact that most of the new RTG players (once identified) would need to be briefed up on the peace process.

Reasons to be Encouraged . . .

16. (S/NF) Stepping back from these immediate concerns, Tamthai mentioned two recent encouraging developments with regard to the peace process:

-- The RTG officials at the Southern Border Province Administration Center (SBPAC) are finally coming to the realization that a strictly military solution is not possible. In Tamthai's view, these are the professional bureaucrats who are actually more important to the peace process than the (oft-changing) high-level politicians. He cautioned, however, that different people have different understandings of what would constitute a "non-military" solution. For example, some RTG officials believe judicial reform alone could bring peace, a view that Tamthai sees as unrealistic.

-- General Anupong now believes the time has come to make public the heretofore secret peace talks, Tamthai claimed. Tamthai himself has been advocating going public for several months now. In his view, operational steps toward peace will require the public's understanding and support. Both sides thus need to sell the peace process to the public, especially residents in and around the conflict areas. Moreover, the RTG needs to be able to tell the outside world that it is pursuing dialogue and not relying on military action alone. Tamthai cautioned, however, that making the transition from secret talks to public dialogue is delicate and difficult, and Anupong has not decided how or when it can be done.

. . . and Discouraged

¶7. (S/NF) Tamthai also pointed to two recent discouraging developments impacting the peace process:

-- The RTG's aforementioned preoccupation with national domestic politics; and

-- Recent RTG setbacks in the south that Tamthai cited but did not elaborate on: first, a recent spate of casualties there that has not been publicly disclosed; and second, new intelligence indicating that the insurgents were more organized than the RTG had previously thought. Tamthai ironically noted a silver lining here, in that these negative developments have helped push RTG and, more specifically, SBPAC officials toward the realization that a solely military solution to the violence is not possible.

Cloak and Dagger

¶8. (S/NF) Tamthai said the next round to talks would take place in late June or early July (pending RTG approval), in a location to be determined. He said the insurgents always choose the location, and then inform the RTG participants at the last minute. Even then, the insurgents provide only the name of the city, at which point the government officials purchase air tickets. They are then met upon arrival at the airport and taken to the meeting site. Tamthai said the Bali meeting surprised him in that he was driven to a meeting site some 90 minutes into the island's interior.

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Comment

¶9. (S/NF) As in our previous meetings, Tamthai was very measured in his comments, simultaneously pointing out progress and obstacles. Clearly, his expectations for significant near-term progress are low, given the current domestic political dynamic in Bangkok. To Tamthai's credit, his approach is patient and his view is long-term, and he will continue to seek opportunities to engineer forward progress. We share, however, his concern that the slow pace of the peace process sends unhelpful signals to the advocates of more violence in the restive south.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MORROW